

The Student - Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE DIFFERENCE

"WHY does my work fall short of the standards of the big magazines?"

This question is asked hundreds of times, for it is strangely true that the majority of writers are incapable of viewing their work in impartial perspective. One writer overestimates the product of his brain and cannot see in it any inferiority to the work of acknowledged masters. Another underestimates and is obsessed by an idea of the unworthiness of his creations. Both are victims of literary selfconsciousness.

Those who overestimate the quality of their work are perhaps in the majority. At least, few are keenly alive to their faults.

Briefly, the case of those who are unsuccessful with the better magazines, although sometimes selling to less exacting publications, is that their stories lack *depth* and *subtlety*.

The writer must not merely make his characters natural—so natural that the reader can find no fault in the portraits presented. He must do more—must reveal to the reader novel traits of character and new facts about human nature.

To illustrate: It is an acknowledged fact that most persons are susceptible to flattery. All readers know this, and so the author may safely employ flattery as a moving force in the development of an incident.

It may be that the hero wishes to obtain some favor and so sets about getting on the good side of the character from whom he desires the favor, by flattering him.

No great skill will be required to make the scene convincing, because the premise upon which it is founded is already admitted to be true, in the mind of the reader.

But the author who employs this device has not taught the reader anything *new*—he has merely taken advantage of knowledge already possessed.

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The master story-teller, in drawing fictional characters, is continually throwing new sidelights on human nature. He reveals, in a logical and convincing manner, motives that the reader would never, for himself, have taken into account.

This, in brief, is the chief difference between the interpretation of life that is found in the lesser magazines and that which may be found in magazines of higher caliber.

It is not the only difference, however. A crude demonstration of the power of flattery may prove ineffective despite the fact that it is fundamentally true to life. The author's illustration of the phase of human nature under consideration may be so broad as to verge on exaggeration.

Suppose someone should approach the average man, saying: "You are the wisest being in the world; no one ever possessed half your brilliancy of intellect." The recipient of this compliment, unless he were a simpleton, would be merely disgusted. He would question not only the flatterer's good judgment, but his sincerity.

If the author pictured the compliment as "getting across," he would be caricaturing human nature. Caricature consists in emphasizing some trait or feature by exaggeration. In this instance it would consist in the flatterer's overdoing the thing and in the victim's "swallowing" such obvious bait.

A similar compliment, however, might be paid in a subtle manner that would "get it across." The skillful writer, desiring to show the effect of flattery, would avoid allowing the character to employ it in its obvious form. He would handle the scene in such a way that the reader would enjoy seeing how cleverly the hero managed to make his victim feel flattered without resorting to highly seasoned compliments.

Naturally the standard of a scene in which the character gained his purpose by indirection would be higher than one in which obvious methods were pictured, or in which human traits were caricatured.

The big story usually is simple in plot but complex in characterization. And its interest lies not only in revelations concerning human nature, but in its portrayal of the development or molding of character. In the more superficial types of fiction there is little character development. The bad man remains bad, the good man remains good; the fool remains a fool and the wise man a sage, throughout the narration. The only change is in their relationship toward each other.

It is needless to comment upon the difference between this type of story and one that portrays the regeneration of a human soul or other character evolution.

True it is, however, that a writer can give out only what is already in him. From a shallow mind he cannot deliver himself of great truths. From an immature mind he cannot teach the mature-minded reader a great deal about life and humanity. He can throw new light upon his subject only when he has acquired a deep, mellow understanding—deeper and more mellow than that possessed by the majority of his audience. The college undergraduate may have acquired an insight into life that makes his every word fascinating to his younger brother; but what he has to say would prove commonplace to an Emerson. So it is all the way up the scale of life. The writer must know a little more than his audience. He cannot be wise or subtle until the finer shades of thought are evolved in his mind.

One thing the aspiring author may do, however: He may establish an ideal—that ideal being to put the utmost depth of thought of which he is capable into all his work. His progress will be a matter of growth—of assimilation and exercise. It may be slow, but if he holds the ideal constantly before him, he will surely find that, after a period of years, he is capable of putting much more into his stories than he was able to put into them when he started—not only because he is more skillful, but because he has a finer store of wisdom from which to draw. —W. E. H.

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WEAK PLOTTING

WHY is it that writers without number still persist in letting the hero circumvent the villain's dark intentions through eavesdropping? Nothing could be weaker in plot construction. It is the old device of the cheap dime-novel writer. It betrays the author's paucity of invention.

Before us, for example, is a story in which the servants are in league with criminals who are plotting to rob the vault containing the family jewels. The hero "happens" to overhear the servants, who are discussing the affair with remarkable definiteness and lack of caution.

Result, the hero "foils" the plot and achieves a lot of credit for his act. The credit is undeserved. Any hero could be placed by the author in a like fortunate position. It is the easy way to solve the problem of the story—so easy, in fact, that it fails to interest readers of mature mind.

Ingenuity, cleverness, daring and similar traits are what readers appreciate in fictional characters. They like to see the hero triumph over difficulties. It doesn't interest them to see him win out, if he has been handed the key to the situation on a silver platter.

In an incident such as outlined, let the author exercise a few lethargic mental corpuscles and substitute something both more ingenious and more convincing. Let the reader be made to feel that the chief character scented the plot through cleverness, rather than luck.

He might, for example, observe some circumstance that to his alert mind indicates possible tampering with the door of the vault. His suspicion having been aroused that someone has been trying to get into the vault, he would set a trap to catch the thief or disclose his identity. An ingenious author would perhaps allow this trap to fail, owing to the cleverness of the hero's opponents, thus necessitating the exercise of even greater ingenuity, as the next step on his part.

The more difficult the hero's task, the more satisfied will the reader be.

A flaw in story construction similar to that of making the solution too easy for the hero consists in making it too easy for the reader by occasionally shifting the viewpoint to the conspirators.

Suppose the reader has become all "keyed up" with eagerness to know who is trying to rob the vault. Then suppose the author changes the scene, introduces a band of conspirators, and lets the reader "in" on the secret.

To give him this advantage is, almost invariably, a mistake. Knowing the "inside stuff," he won't care especially to read further in order to see the conspirators uncovered.

In other words, maintain the single viewpoint. There are at least fifty-seven additional reasons for maintaining it, but the aim of keeping the reader in ignorance about what is going on outside of the hero's knowledge is one of the most important. *W. E. H.*

SPEECH IN THE SOUTH

(By Hilda Koppel)

MANY writers and would-be writers evidently find the South an interesting field, for innumerable stories appear in different magazines in which the authors, ignorant of the forms of speech which are characteristic of some parts of "Dixie", are guilty of great blunders.

People of education and refinement in this section never use incorrect English, barring the few common colloquialisms; no double negatives, no "ain'ts," no dropping of "g's," nor any of the other mistakes so generally attributed to them, are ever heard among cultured Southerners.

New Orleans is distinguished by no expressions usually considered distinctly Southern, except the softer accent. Owing to the large French-speaking population, a slightly foreign accent is marked among the French themselves, and many Creole terms are in common usage, as: "lagniappe," "gumbo," "hein," etc., for every native here understands at least a little French.

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In the rural parts of Louisiana and all over Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas, the following expressions are used:

"I reckon"; "you-all"; "how-come"; "my goodness alive"; "Lawdy merey"; "I 'most died, or I 'most walked to town"; "curious" (meaning queer or strange), as: "I saw a curious-looking man," or "It gave me the most curious feeling"; "nigger"; and the shopping or business district is always referred to as "uptown"; the word village is never heard. When "pretty" is used adverbally, as in "pretty much," "pretty bad," etc., it is not used with another word as in the following ridiculous manner (observed in a recent story): "It was pretty, mighty hard."

Mighty is much used adverbially but only in the sense of very as: "She's a mighty attractive girl."

Gentlemen are not longer in the habit of addressing each other as "sir," or ladies as "ma'am." The young people continue to say "yes, sir, no, ma'am," "all right, mum," to their elders, but the other forms are just as much used.

For the writer who works with a real sympathy and understanding and does not allow vague ideas, erroneous opinions and established precedents to guide him, there is ample opportunity for portrayal of the real South.

CRITICAL FRAGMENTS

Fragment 25.

I HAVE before me an essay on the serious consequences of jumping at conclusions. It is forcibly written and shows by means of graphic illustrations the really tragic results that may follow ill-considered deductions.

It is difficult, however, to consider this essay as a marketable

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piece of work, despite the fact that there are publications which like moral essays designed to impress the young. The trouble, in this particular instance, is that the illustrations are too harrowing. The author shows—and convincingly, too—that horrible death and maiming for life are among the frequent results of the fault with which he is dealing.

He wishes to teach a lesson that will make a deep impression, and has gathered and conjured up the most gruesome illustrations possible. But he is sure to find that practically all of the editors to whom he might submit the essay will regard it as too "strong medicine."

The subject could be impressively handled, yet with nothing in it of actually harrowing nature. Examples of financial disaster following in the wake of jumping at conclusions would be appropriate. The killing and maiming could be avoided, and yet the same effect obtained, if it were shown how jumping at conclusions *nearly* caused such disasters to life and limb. Such changes as these might leave the article as strong as ever, and get it past the editorial censorship.

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